



Photos by Gerard Tournebise

Indian History and Identity

The Tarahumara of Chihuahua

Claudia Molinari*

The Sierra Tarahumara, or Tarahumara Mountains, are historic. They became the cultural birthplace of the ethnic groups living today in the southwestern part of the state of Chihuahua (the Tarahumara, the Tepehuano, the Pima and the Guarojío) in a specific era, the Spanish colonial period.

What do I mean by this? I mean that the “Indians” of today are not the same as those who populated the Americas before the hemisphere had that name. Regardless of the romantic, a-historical idea of unalterable native communities on the margins of the social processes of states and nations, contemporary indigenous peoples exist today because they “remade” themselves in the unfolding of five centuries of colonization. Most of the native peoples (the Concho, Toboso, Acaxee,

* Anthropologist. Professor and researcher at the National School of Anthropology and History (ENAH), Mexico City. claudia.molinari@caracmail.com

Xixime and Salinero to name only a few) succumbed before the colonies declared their independence from Europe, and others disappeared as a result of the independence (for example, the Apache and Comanche in the U.S. Southwest).

The “Tarahumara culture” as it is described by prestigious anthropologists in innumerable articles and books, must date from the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, when the Tarahumara staged their last armed rebellions and definitively lost control over the Papigochi Valley (their original territory at the time of contact with the Spanish) and withdrew as a survival strategy to the Sierra Madre, leaving behind the military control of the colonial *villas*.

It is very possible that before the arrival of the Europeans, some Tarahumara already inhabited the spurs of the Eastern Sierra Madre, together with other nations like the Tubar, the Mori and the Chínipa, but it must certainly have been a very small population compared to that which lived in the central valleys of



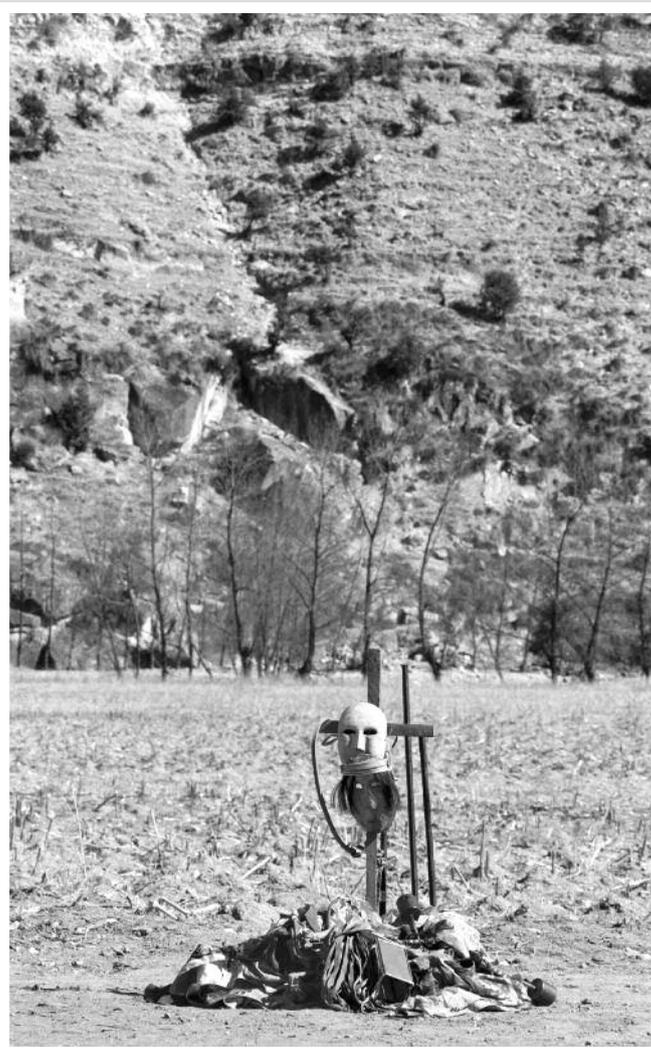
what is today the state of Chihuahua, northwest of Mexico City.

After being definitively defeated in their attempted armed resistance to the colonization (the last reported rebellion took place about 1740), the Tarahumara took refuge in the mountains, taking with them two things that, paradoxically, they had gotten from the Catholic missionaries: the metal ax, with which they would be able to appropriate forest resources and produce firewood and build houses, fences and barns; and the herds of goats, whose excrement would fertilize the thin soil for cultivation. They also took with them ideas that they had acquired in the years of Christian evangelism, with which they forged their own religion that also helped resist the Spanish presence, although they adopted the Spanish god, perhaps as a symbolic way to acquire “white power.”

With these elements, the uprooted Tarahumara were able to adapt to the mountain environment in isolated settlements based on rain-fed agriculture. Organized in small hamlets where two, three or up to five nuclear families lived, they cultivated areas of between one and two hectares and eventually began to identify with a larger political-religious center, where the Jesuits and later the Franciscans founded missions, following the “Indians” in their retreat through the mountains. In this way, the typical Tarahumara town that we know today was formed.

To prove what I have just written with weighty arguments, we would have to resort to archaeological excavation and its results. Tracing the foundation of missions in the Chihuahua mountains would give us some clues. I propose we analyze this people’s stories, reconstructing their world view, of which only a small part is explained here.

Looking at its constituent elements, we can see that the Tarahumara world view is a product of the eighteenth century. It expresses above all the consciousness of an unequal relationship between the *Rarámuri* (Tarahu-



A large part of the Tarahumara religious rites are dedicated to appeals for rain and good weather.

mara) people and the *chabochi*, or whites. It also expresses a symbolic resistance—not an armed one like in the seventeenth century—to the subjection of their culture and environment, by portraying the Tarahumara as the children of God, and the *chabochi*, or whites and mestizos, as children of the Devil. At the same time it is a peasant world view, whose expectations are based on a good harvest, which always depends on climatic conditions. This is why a large part of their religious rites are dedicated to appeals for rain and good weather. Rites as important as the Dance of the Moors and the Pharisees



Indigenous peoples exist today because they “remade” themselves during five centuries of colonization.

for the Holy Week fiestas, or the dance of the *matachines* for December 12, the day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the sacrifice of cows or goats, and the home brewing and consumption of corn beer, *tesgüino*, known in Tarahumara as *sowiki* or *batari*.

The Tarahumara are usually haughty and disdainful with *chabochi* of all kinds. They establish personal contact only very slowly, guided by intuition. If the outsider is not to their liking, they simply ignore him or her. They tend to joke in their “social” conversations, and only very rarely talk about them-

selves. It is possible that this typical Tarahumara attitude was also forged as a result of contact with the Spanish and mestizos, as a result of their flight, search for refuge and negation of the white man.

For almost a century, the Tarahumara fought the Spanish and their system with rebellions of mobile archers, for which they had to resort to secrecy and simulation. No one in the Spanish *villas* could even suspect that there was an Indian conspiracy or everyone’s expectations would be dashed. A rebellion could be planned for years; the men in the towns found out about it and joined the organization clandestinely all the while that in the eyes of the missionaries and the Spanish government officials they acted as though they gracefully accepted living circumscribed to the missions. The uprising, as the Spanish called it, was planned inside the organization, which was usually multi-ethnic and spread over several regions. They made bows and arrows that they hid in the mountains usually poisoning the tips shortly before the time came to attack a mission or a *villa*. The assault on the Catholic church was usually their first action. Many missionary martyrs were created in this way.

The rebels grouped around charismatic leaders, many of them shamans and government officials before the demographic and cultural collapse that came with colonization of the whole Great Chichimeca area, the pre-Hispanic cultural area north of the Grijalva River that extended to what is now Santa Fe in New Mexico. These leaders were people removed from their posts in the original power structure, who had what the specialists call a messianic or millenarian discourse. According to the chronicles, the leaders called for the struggle preaching a future of well being without Spaniards, or saying that no one would really die because they would be reborn younger seven days after the battle, reborn to a world of abundance. Apparently, thousands of men participated in these movements and many groups of warriors attacked strategic Spanish

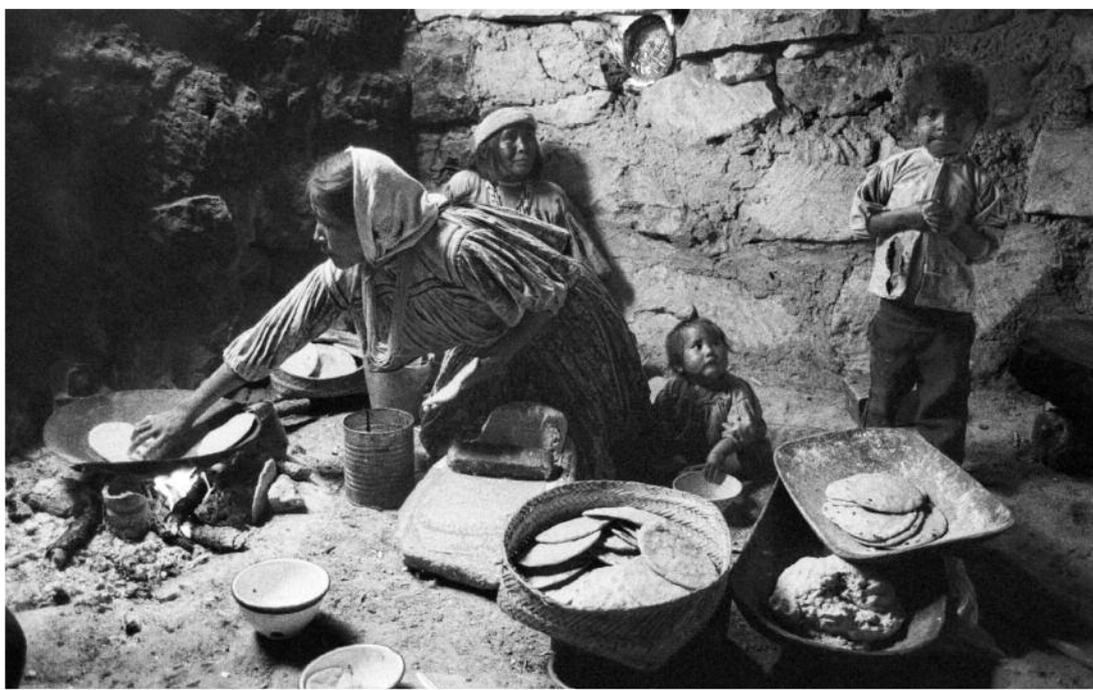
enclaves on nights with a full moon. Later they dug in on the steep mountainsides where the Spanish horses could not reach. The bands would regroup and, if they were strong enough and conditions were right, they would attack again. An uprising lasted three or four years, and no longer than 10. The rebels could not store foodstuffs for very long and the Spaniards burned their crops to cut off their supplies. In addition, they threatened the leaders, offering them amnesty in exchange for surrender or cutting off their heads and displaying them in public places.

Historians like Susan Deeds and Luis González Rodríguez have found a relationship between epidemics and rebellions since, in many cases, before a big rebellion the indigenous peoples suffered devastating epidemics. Perhaps more than 50 percent of the native population died from disease before the beginning of the seventeenth century. This leads me to believe that armed rebellion was a reaction to the social devastation caused by the many deaths from smallpox,

measles or plague, for which the natives had no biological defenses at all because they were not diseases endemic to the Americas.

Some rebellions had more of an impact on the advance of colonization than others. One of the most famous was the 1616 rebellion of the Tepehuan, which drove the foreigners away from the *villas* they had founded for more than 10 years. However, by the end of the seventeenth century, the citizens of New Spain finally managed to achieve military control over the rebels and settled on the best land in the region, particularly along the Royal Road Inland, also known as “the Silver Road,” the most important commercial route in northern New Spain. That was the time of the consolidation of colonial settlements in the province of New Vizcaya, comprised of what is today Chihuahua, Sonora, Durango and part of Sinaloa, at the same time that mining began to boom.

It was then that the Tarahumara retreated to the mountains and, instead of fighting, opted to isolate themselves, protected by the

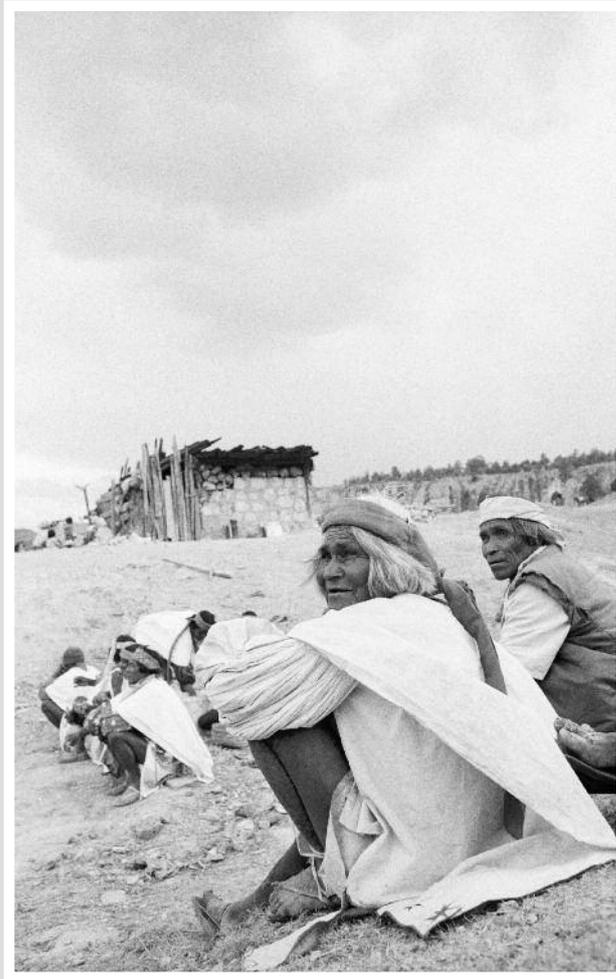


inaccessible mountains. The clash with the foreigners was no longer armed and became symbolic and is today a fundamental component of their world view and all their religious practices. The Easter Week fiesta, for example, is the ritual representation of the fight between good and evil in which good triumphs and begins time again, the New Year and planting season. After this retreat, the ethnic community reestablished itself and the ratio of men to women balanced out with time, in the long run forming a culturally coherent and defined community.

But not all the Tarahumara renounced the armed struggle. During the eighteenth century and part of the nineteenth, many collaborated with the Apache in their raids, but not openly. They guided them to the supposedly hidden corrals of rich Mexican cattle ranchers and, disguised as Apache, attacked mestizo caravans and towns, taking with them cows, mules and horses.

During the nineteenth century, a new rise in mining prompted the development of Mexican towns in the Sierra Tarahumara, towns like Guadalupe and Calvo (or Cusihuiachi), which though they attained national importance because of the mining boom, even coining money, had a very localized impact in the mountains themselves. It was the twentieth century and forestry (which brought with it the construction of highways, the arrival of manufactured products and wage labor) that definitively broke the voluntary isolation that the Tarahumara lived in for about two centuries and that finally brought the collapse of a stable or functional way of life when it altered the traditional agricultural cycle by excessive logging of the country's largest coniferous forest.

Today, the Sierra Tarahumara is no longer the "region of refuge" that separated the indigenous population from contact with the mestizo population. After a century of overlogging, the great pines have disappeared,



“I’m tired of dancing; we dance for nothing just because God doesn’t send rain because God is old now.”

making way for tourism in this imposing geographical area. Modern Protestant missions offer a new road to salvation if the Tarahumara stop drinking *tesgüino* and going to their fiestas. Undoubtedly the Tarahumara will also resist this form of intrusion into the rhythm of their lives because their character is prepared for it, but the new generations will be very different from past ones. In the meantime, I can perceive disenchantment on the part of some elders when they talk about the future. One said to me one day, “I’m tired of dancing; we dance just because God doesn’t send rain because God is old now.” **MM**



The Origin of the World of Men

Some little old men in the Sierra Tarahumara told me that when God made the world, he first made a man and a woman. He modeled them from corn dough and clay. Then he made pairs of all the good animals that help people: cows, goats, fowl, deer, that at that time knew how to talk and dance with humans. Then God wanted to give life to these dolls that were like his playthings, so he blew into the mouth of each one. They say that he blew into the women's mouths three or four times and into the men's mouths only three times. This breath of God is the origin of the *aliwala* souls that every Tarahumara person and animal has.

They say that the souls live inside the body, one of the great ones in the head, another in the belly, others in the joints. Different souls in different parts of the body that leave when the person is asleep, dreaming, or when he or she is ill or bewitched. So, to be strong and healthy while awake, it is important that the souls all be inside the body.

That was how the Tarahumara lived: working the land and dancing at their festivals with *tesgüino* (a "ritual" fermented drink made of corn, drunk at festivals and religious ceremonies) because that is what God said they should do so he would send them rain, so the corn could grow and the world continue to exist.

They say that one day the Devil, God's older brother, became envious of what his younger brother had created. So, he, too, made dolls and tried in vain to breathe life into them. It seems that he made them of lime because they were very white. He

also made snakes, scorpions, spiders, malignant predators and serpents of all kinds. However, in spite of the fact that he put his lips on the mouths of his dolls and blew hard into their bodies with all his might, they did not come to life. For that reason, he asked God for help.

God helped him because he helps everyone, but he only wanted to blow twice into each of the Devil's dolls, and so gave them life. That is where the *chabochi* (the mestizos or whites) come from, the men whose beards make them look like they have spiders on their face and the women who must be distrusted.

That is why they say that there are two kinds of people: the *ralamuli* and the *chaboame*. The *rarámuri*, or Tarahumara (both versions of the words in Spanish) do things the way that pleases God, but the *chabochi* continually displease him because they are noisy and frequently treacherous. They do not drink the *tesgüino* made for the fiestas with the respect that God ordained: they do not drink it to work, but to get drunk.

The Tarahumaras do act the way that pleases God and for that reason they live at the edge of the world: they are the pillars that hold it up because the world is like a tortilla.

Note: Claudia Molinari wrote this story based on ethnographic data gathered over a period of 15 years research into the Tarahumara culture in the state of Chihuahua. In it, she tries to depict the ideas that many Tarahumara—those who grow corn as their main activity—have today about the origin of the world of men.